DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 431 HE 015 760

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TITLE Distance Education Systems: How to Assess Them.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; College Programs; College Role; Delivery Systems; *Educational Assessment; Educational Policy; *Extension Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; *Nontraditional Education; Program Administration; *Program Evaluation; Resource Allocation; Student College Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Distance Education

ABSTRACT

Perspectives on accountability in distance education, which began in Australia in 1911 at Queensland University, are considered. It is suggested that to be effective, distance education needs a sound philosophical basis; appropriate organizational structure; adequate resource allocation; specialized educational techniques and student access; production of effective learning materials; an efficient course delivery system, including a student support system; staff development programs; and evaluative and monitoring procedures. Each component of a distance education system needs careful examination. The following questions must be considered: how does the institution perceive and articulate its role in terms of students admitted, what is taught and by whom, and teaching methods; how much does the institution invest in its distance education system, and what priority does it accord the system; how well articulated is the distance education system with the rest of the institution; what provisions are made for the design and development of new courses; are materials produced in a format that facilitates student usage and that is appropriate to the subject, level of the course, and the updating requirements; has an efficient system been devised for mailing materials, processing assignments, dealing with student inquiries, arranging tutorials, and updating files; and what kind of formal evaluation program does the institution have? (SW)

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Distance Education Systems: How to Assess Them

J.E. Gough

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INTRODUCTION

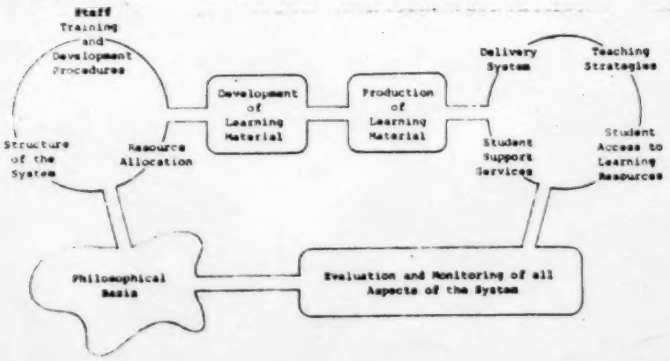
Distance education systems in Australian tertiary education have been with us for a long time with Queensland University commencing such an enterprise in 1911 and RMIT in 1919. In the last decade, however, the number of institutions offering courses off campus has multiplied dramatically as has the number of students enrolling in courses in this mode. Inasmuch as this is an extension and broadening of educational opportunities particularly for segments of the community previously unable to participate in tertiary education, it is to be commended. If the quality of the educational experience provided, however, is inferior and unsatisfactory, then the apparent extension of educational opportunities becomes more illusory than real.

A DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

If Distance Education is to be effective then it needs to be recognised as a valid educational mode which requires:

- a sound philosophical basis
- an appropriate organisational structure
- adequate resource allocation
- the use of specialised educational techniques in designing learning experiences, writing self instructional materials, developing appropriate teaching strategies and providing adequate student access to learning resources
- production processes that allow learning materials to be published in pedagogically sound and attractive format using audio, video and print as appropriate
- an efficient course 'delivery' system in its widest sense including the development of an effective support system to meet the needs of students at a distance both before enrolment and as enrolled students
- programs for staff training and development
- evaluative and monitoring procedures to improve the system

Such a system could be shown schematically as follows.



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All of this requires a considerable commitment on the part of any institution which wishes to develop a distance education system and emphasises the necessity of providing substantial resources in order to do the job effectively. If institutions are to invest substantial resources in developing such systems, they need to be assured of sufficient numbers of students to make them viable and to avoid wasteful duplication of resources. This means that the number of institutions permitted to develop distance education systems should be strictly limited and that those systems that are supported and developed should be monitored.

EVALUATING DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The process of evaluating distance education systems requires that each of the components of the system needs careful examination. This examination would generate a whole series of questions, examples of which are shown below:

Philosophical Basis:
How does the institution perceive and articulate its role in distance education in terms of:

- which students it admits
- what they are taught
- how and
- by whom?

To what extent does the institution address the problems of the really isolated student and make its courses accessible to that student as opposed to arrangements that permit the institution to increase its enrolment by providing for easily accessible groups of students? Does the institution intend to provide an adequate range of courses, including those more difficult to teach at a distance or is it only offering courses that can be presented cheaply and easily? Does the institution have a commitment to distance education as such or are its interests largely concerned with its own institutional well being?

Resource Allocation:
How much does the institution invest in its distance education system both in absolute terms and as a relative proportion of its budget? What priority does it accord its distance education system in terms of money, staff, equipment and space? How does the institution determine what resources are to be allocated and what implication does this have for its distance education system?

Structure:
In what ways has the institution taken account of the complexity of a distance education system and what kind of structure has it developed to give expression to the functions of the system? How well articulated is that structure with the rest of the institution? How effectively does it express the philosophy?

Staff Training and Development:
Distance education is new to many staff, both teaching and non-teaching. It requires new ways of doing things – in preparing materials, producing them, delivering courses, and providing support services for students. Few staff are experienced or trained, and if the system is to develop there needs to be systematic and continuing staff training and development.

Development of Learning Materials:
What provisions are made for the design and development of new courses in lead time, staff allocation, staff loads, budgetary provision? Is it a process

which staff have to undertake as an extra load, or is it properly allowed for in terms of the time and effort it requires? Are staff given recognition for what they do in preparing courses for off campus studies, and if so, in what ways? For example, is it a criterion for promotion? Is provision made for specialist input in subject areas where sufficient expertise does not exist on staff? Are instructional designers, editors, and visual designers involved appropriately in the developmental process?

Production of Learning Materials:
Are materials produced in a format which facilitates student usage and which is appropriate to the subject or discipline, to the level of the course and to the requirements for updating the material? Are audio and video materials used, in what ways, how extensively, and for what purposes?

Delivery System:
Has an efficient system been devised for mailing materials, processing assignments dealing with student enquiries and complaints, arranging tutorials and schools, recording student transactions and updating files? Have teaching strategies consistent with the use of self-instructional materials been developed? Are there adequate support services available to the student providing contact with academic staff and with other students? Are reasonable provisions made for counselling, career advice and other specialist services? Is there sufficient provision for students' access to learning resources other than the distributed materials, such as library, bookshop, laboratories and computer?

Evaluation and Monitoring:
What kind of formal program for evaluation of all aspects of the system does the institution have? How quickly can it respond to changes that are shown to be necessary? To what extent does the system provide for independent evaluators participating in its reviews? How defensive is it when problems are discovered?

Obviously, many more questions need to be asked and answered if distance education systems are to meet the needs of education in the eighties.

CONCLUSION

Education today is being called into question perhaps more than ever before. The growth of the total education budget over the past decade or so has heightened the call for accountability. Particularly in the tertiary sector it would seem that universities and colleges cannot expect increased funding while the economy remains under pressure. Thus the effectiveness of tertiary institutions in meeting their objectives is likely to be subject to regular and increasing audit.

Within such a context there is no substitute for rigorous and continuing evaluation of our distance education systems.